



*In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful*

**Opening remarks**

to

**INTER-COUNTRY MEETING ON PANDEMIC (H1N1) 2009:  
REVISION /STRENGTHENING OF STRATEGIES FOR SURVEILLANCE AND  
RESPONSE IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION**

**Cairo, Egypt, 27–29 April 2010**

Dear Colleagues

I am pleased to welcome you all to this intercountry meeting on revision and strengthening of strategies for surveillance of and response to pandemic (H1N1) 2009 in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. I would like to express my gratitude to our colleagues from WHO headquarters for their participation in this meeting. I would also like to extend my appreciation to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for their continuous support to our Region. My thanks also go to the Naval Medical Research Unit Three (NAMRU-3), a WHO collaborating centre in our Region, for their valuable and continuing support to the Region. Our UN partners are also recognized for their continuous support in response to the current pandemic H1N1. Our delegates from Member States also deserve our thanks.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It has been one year since the pandemic H1N1 influenza virus was first detected. Early on, it was noticed that this novel H1N1 influenza virus deviated from influenza's usual pattern of activity in striking ways. In the months that followed, the virus caused a global pandemic. While the pandemic never became as deadly as we initially feared, it was not as mild as some experts now believe. Furthermore, it exposed some serious shortcomings in the public health response.

Predicting the exact nature and development of the pandemic H1N1 viruses remains a challenge as influenza viruses are notoriously variable, do not follow set patterns, and each is different. Therefore, we have to benefit from other countries' experiences. In the Eastern Mediterranean Region, the virus struck at a time when it was diminishing in other regions in the

world, especially in countries in the southern hemisphere. This gave us a chance to benefit from these countries, which faced an escalating pattern and enabled us to characterize the course of the pandemic, to define its impact and to come out with some predictions about its future.

Distinguished Guests,

We have greatly underestimated the number of people infected, and we still lack reliable statistics on death rates from country to country. Yet no one who helped care for the large number of critically ill patients could conclude that influenza in the countries that lacked resources was as mild as in other countries in the Region.

The vaccine arrived later than estimated, and only about three million people received it in the Region — not nearly enough. Only 3 of the 7 resource-poor countries in need of the pandemic H1N1 vaccine have received it so far. Seasonal influenza following the outbreak of a pandemic is usually worse than the years preceding it, because the influenza essentially becomes revived with new genetic material. It has now been agreed that the seasonal influenza vaccine for 2010/2011 will contain the pandemic H1N1 strain, and recommendations about risk and target groups are being reassessed.

Although the pandemic influenza activity across the world has now waned, we still don't know when the pandemic is going to be over. It is likely that H1N1 will continue to cause sporadic cases. In some highly susceptible, unvaccinated populations it may even produce local outbreaks. However, the timely and accurate reporting through efficient surveillance, public health preparedness and response, the social distancing precautions, and vaccine production and roll-out campaigns which were implemented over the past year have all had impact in mitigating the pandemic H1N1 virus and diminishing the effect of the pandemic on social and economic conditions in the Region. Maintenance of transparency in sharing information on the activity of the pandemic H1N1 virus, with full recognition of the unfavourable consequences of lack of transparency, is critical for achieving a coordinated response. A commitment to transparency is a policy decision that countries must make.

Distinguished Guests,

The WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean has worked closely with its Member States to respond efficiently to the pandemic influenza. Despite all our efforts, we continue to have many unanswered questions about the virus. Moreover, Member States in the Region have been faced by certain challenges related to surveillance of the pandemic influenza, preparedness of the health system capacity to respond, and inadequacy of financial resources.

We have gathered experts here today in order to collectively address these challenges. We will all have the opportunity to review once again our surveillance situation and the different aspects of the response to the pandemic. Identification of the main challenges will be key to identifying lessons learned and making recommendations on how to be better prepared to respond effectively to future pandemics and future large-scale global public health events.

WHO headquarters has started a review process to examine the world's response to pandemic (H1N1) 2009. The goal of this exercise is to review what has been done, to identify lessons learned and to find out what the world needs to do next, including countries and organizations such as WHO. Also, health officials in a number of Member States are already reviewing their governments' response and deriving lessons from the accumulated experience in order to mitigate the impact of the next public health emergency.

Among the many questions that need to be answered are: How were decisions made? What impact did these decisions have on our ability to respond effectively to the pandemic? Could policy-makers have made better decisions? Could they have considered things in a different way at that time? Your presence with us, Ladies and Gentlemen, will help us answer these questions based on your experience in your respective countries.

The threats we face are always evolving, but we cannot continue to be taken by surprise each time a new virus emerges. For that reason, our defence strategies must evolve. We need to have a steady and wide-ranging system that can respond to any threat as quickly as possible.

These are some of the thoughts that I wanted to share with you this morning. I would like to thank you all again, and to encourage all of you to gain the utmost benefit from this vital meeting through sound discussions and transparent exchange of ideas. Your expertise and

recommendations will certainly guide WHO, as well as your respective countries, in responding to any emergency that might be of international concern.

Wishing you a very successful meeting.